



St. Nicholas the Wonderworker

A SERMON

December 6, 1990

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

In the hymns of the Vespers last night in honor of the holy Nicholas, Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia, we hear: “O Father Nicholas, though Myra is silent yet the whole world which is enlightened by thee cries out with hymns of acclamation.” And indeed, though Myra is silent (since the church of Saint Nicholas is in ruins) the whole world now takes over the honor of offering acclamations, glory and hymns to him and all his wondrous works. There is not an Orthodox country, yea, not even a part of the world today because of the diaspora and the emigration of the Orthodox from their traditional homelands—there is not a place in the world that does not celebrate the name of Saint Nicholas by naming churches and individuals after him.

I want to share with you today some miracles of Saint Nicholas which we have heard first hand from the people who experienced them. The first I want to tell you about is a Russian man I met some years ago and has since reposed who lived in New York. His name was Nicholas Nicholaevich. After several visits and discussions with him I asked him how it was that he had the name of Nicholas Nicholaevich—having the same name as his father—and he himself had a son whom he named Nicholas. I thought this was a bit unusual and also that it wasn’t a very common Russian practice, and he said, “There’s a story that we have the name of Nicholas in our family and we have had it for—I’m the second generation and Nicholas is third.” I asked him to relate that story and he told me this:

His grandfather, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was traveling in Russia in an enclosed sleigh. As they were driving from one city to another, a snow storm came up. The driver tried very desperately to keep the horses on the road and to continue at least to a way-station because there—as in the Old West—they used to have posts or stations along the road where travelers could stop and rest and give their horses a rest also. He tried desperately, but was not successful. The sleigh came to a halt; the horses had gone off the road

and were in deep snow and were unable to move farther. It was a howling, raging storm with heavy snows, so he got down and tapped on the window of the sleigh. He told his master that they were hopelessly lost. The master asked him to come into the sleigh and wrapped him up with blankets and coats that they had there and they waited for their end. They were sure that they would perish in the cold and that they would not be able to live out the storm.

After some time, they had become very cold. They heard a tap on the window. They looked and there was an elderly man dressed in peasants' clothes and he said, "What is the trouble here that you are sitting in this sleigh?" They said that they were off the road and that the horses had lost the way and were not able to move.

He said, "I will take you out of the snow." So the driver and the Master got out of the sleigh and the peasant got up on the sleigh, started the horses, and led them out of the snow, back onto the road. He told them that he would drive for them, and that they should remain in the sleigh, protected from the weather, and that he would get them to the station. They, thinking that he was from these parts, were very confused and puzzled at how he came out into that snow storm and found them. As they approached the station, the sleigh stopped and the peasant came and tapped on the window a second time and told them that they should continue. He pointed for them and they could see the light of the inn. Although the snow was still falling and the storm still raging, he told them that they should continue to that inn. The Master asked him to get into the sleigh and then ride with them, but he refused. The Master said, "But where will you go?"

He said, "I will go, but you will see me at the inn."

The Master wanted to reward him and he said, "What can I do for you because you have saved our lives, and you've put our horses back on the road. Out of gratitude, we want to give you something," and he reached for his pouch to give him money.

The peasant said, "No, no, no. You need not give me anything but I ask one thing of you."

And he said, "What is that?"

He said, "I ask that you name your first born son after me and keep my name in your family from generation to generation."

The master thought that was a curious request and said, "Yes, and what is your name?"

He said, "You will see me at the inn and you will know." And he turned around and disappeared into the snow.

They continued to the inn and hurried in because they were very cold and wanted to order hot tea to refresh themselves. When they went in they looked around, but did not see the peasant. They asked the innkeeper, and the innkeeper said, "No, there's no one living in this area." They marveled at how they came and how they found the inn and were also puzzled because he said that they would see him but they did not see him anywhere around. Then the master happened to look and there in one corner of the inn, in the dining room, was an icon of Saint Nicholas with a burning candle in front. He understood immediately then because there was no one else in the inn. He understood immediately that it was Saint Nicholas who had helped them. So he told the driver that he would keep his vow to Saint Nicholas and retain the name in the family.

Some years later he married and had his first born son, He told his wife, "Because I was saved by the Saint, in fulfillment of the vow, we will name our son Nicholas." and she agreed. However, her mother who was living with them did not. She had a brother who had perished in a military campaign who had been named Timothy. She wanted very much to name her grandson Timothy, in honor of her brother. She felt so strongly about this that in secret she made arrangements with a priest to baptize the child in a nearby church, although the common practice was to baptize infants at home (churches were unheated in those days). The child was perfectly healthy, and was several days old. After the priest raised the child out of the baptismal font having given him the name Timothy, he returned the infant to the grandmother who was going to dress and prepare the child to take him home. The child suddenly gasped and died. When the master heard of this, he was not surprised and said, "It is a violation of the vow that I made that I would always name my first born son Nicholas."

So when the second boy was born (who now became the first born son) he was named Nicholas and he, in turn, continued the tradition by naming his son Nicholas. That was *this* Nicholas' father. Through their entire lifetime—throughout his grandfather's lifetime, and his father's lifetime, there were many instances in which they were saved, protected, and guided by the Saint. The

second generation Nicholas Nicholaevich told me himself of two episodes in his own life when the saint delivered him from danger.

The first episode I heard from him occurred during the Second World War (1939-1945). The family escaped from Russia and had, like many other families, a harrowing experience. Finally they made their way to Constantinople, and from Constantinople they made their way back to Yugoslavia, where the Church administration was at Parovitizi. They became members of the Russian community in Belgrade. Nicholas Nicholaevich was a young man who was then enrolled in the faculty of law at the University of Belgrade. He was too young to serve in the army, but during the bombardment of Yugoslavia and the Nazi invasion, being a young man and very impetuous and energetic, he volunteered his services. He went to the military headquarters near Belgrade and asked what he could do to help.

“Well,” they said, “the best we can do with you, young man, is to put you in the medics and you can help them to pick up the wounded.” So he volunteered for one day and when he reported for duty, he was assigned to pick up the wounded, to bring them to a medical facility there, a field hospital. When he was given a vehicle, an elderly gentleman with a white beard was assigned as his partner. The old man said, “I’ll drive and you’ll help.”

Nicholas thought to himself, “Oh no, here’s this little old man who is not going to be able to do much of anything. I’m going to be doing all the heavy lifting, and I’ll probably have to drive and dodge the bombs, but, nevertheless, here we go.” They took off and they darted around the city that day picking up the wounded while under fire, with bombs falling around them and fires and refugees everywhere. They would start down one street, but explosions or falling debris would cause detour after detour. They worked from early in the morning until the setting of the sun. But, contrary to what Nicholas had suspected, the little old man had just as much energy as he did and raced from place to place picking up the wounded, helping carry them, driving back to the hospital, and taking the next assignment immediately.

As the day wore on, they became very tired. Nicholas finally said, “We should stop now for a rest and something to eat.” The little old man said, “Yes, by all means. We’ll park the vehicle here and you go ahead and have your meal, and I’ll see you a little later.” And he disappeared.

Nicholas went to have dinner and as left the area, a bomb fell and destroyed the vehicle. It had been parked near a large gasoline storage tank (their vehicle needed to be refilled) and a bomb hit the storage tank. The vehicle was completely destroyed, which meant they couldn't continue. He went back after his dinner and asked for that man and no one really knew much about him, but they said that his name was Nicholas. And Nicholas Nicholaevich said that, again, it was Saint Nicholas who accompanied him that day because they drove in among burning buildings and with bombs falling all around, and they kept going all day. Other units had stopped or were afraid because of the danger and had decided to suspend rescue operations until the bombings had stopped, but not this team. The two Nicholases had continued throughout the day collecting the wounded.

He related a second episode to me. He had finished the faculty of law, had been graduated, and had practiced law, and at the end of the war the administration of the Church had moved to Munich, but he went to Berlin to take graduate studies in law at the university there. One day as he was leaving classes he saw a great commotion, so he turned into a side street out of his way to see what was going on. As he approached, he saw a large apartment building— his recollection was that it was about five stories in height—in flames. A whole crowd of people were on the sidewalk across the street and the firemen and police had cordoned off the property. Coming closer, he heard a screaming woman. Then he looked at the building and saw in the fifth floor window a small boy who was also screaming. The mother screamed frantically and tried to break away from those holding her back. She wanted someone to get her child; she cried, "Someone rescue my child."

Nicholas drew closer and said, "Why doesn't someone do something?" But the firemen told him to step back because it was very dangerous, the building was going to collapse; they didn't want the loss of an additional life. There was just no way to save the boy.

So Nicholas, being the type of person that he was, became very impatient with what he was seeing and said, "This is not right, we have to do something." As Nicholas was pacing to and fro trying to figure out what to do, an elderly man with a white beard appeared. He looked like one of the professors from the university. This man said to him, "Nicholas, why are you pacing around?"

Nicholas looked at him but he didn't know him, and wondered how the man could know his name. Nicholas replied, "Something has to be done for that child, we can't all just stand here."

The elderly man said to him "You go and get him, and nothing will happen to you. You bring the child back here where we are."

So Nicholas watched and when the attention of the firemen and police was diverted, he dashed and broke through the cordon and ran into the building and ran up the four flights of stairs, ran into the room where the boy was, grabbed the child and wrapped him in his coat (he had a big overcoat), turned and raced down the steps. When he got to the first floor, the whole stairway collapsed in flames. Although there were burning timbers falling with flames and sparks all around him, he said that when he came out of the building with the child, he looked and not even an ash had fallen on his coat. He couldn't even feel the heat at all, although he had been in that building. Of course, the foremen and the police were very disturbed that Nicholas had run in, but it was too late and they didn't send anyone after him. He came out, took the child, gave the boy back to his mother, and went back to where he had been standing. The professor, or the one whom he had thought might be a professor, was nowhere to be found. And again, it came to him that it was his protector and the protector of his family, our Father, Saint Nicholas.

Last night during the Vigil, someone told me an amazing miracle of Saint Nicholas. When he lived in Jordanville, New York (near the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Monastery) across the street from where he was living there was an elderly Russian couple. The elderly man told the story because he had experienced it himself.

He said that in Russia after the Revolution their home was invaded by the Komsomol one night. About two o'clock in the morning there was a banging on the door and three or four of the Komsomol (so-called) youths broke in and they told this man and his wife to sign a particular register; the register was a listing of all those people who were not Orthodox. And the Komsomol said, "You sign that you are *not* Orthodox."

The man said, "I can't do that because we *are* Orthodox."

And the Komsomol officer said, "No, you don't understand. We're asking you to sign your name here in the privacy of your own home and no one else

will need to know. You just cooperate and sign here and you don't have to do anything, we'll even let you keep your icons on the wall—just sign your names."

Then the man of the house responded, I can't do that because we *are* Orthodox, and I will not sign that we are *not* Orthodox in your book or any book, either in the privacy of my home or even on the crossroads will I do that."

At this point the officer became very upset and looked at the man's wife who was holding an infant child (they had two additional children) and said, "If you don't cooperate, I am going to kill this child right in front of your eyes. And I am serious about it."

At this point, the mother (his wife) held the child much closer. The two other children were crying and screaming. The parents tried to calm them down but the Komsomol officers said, "Sign. Otherwise you will bring harm to your family."

The man still refused and said, "I cannot do something like that because I am Orthodox and I will *not* sign that paper."

So the officer looked at one of the thugs with him and said, "Take care of that child." They grabbed the child from his mother and banged his head against the door knob and killed it right before their eyes. At this point the parents became almost hysterical but the Komsomol officer said, "Now are you going to sign?"

They said, "Absolutely not."

He said, "Then we'll take you to the prison." He ordered that the parents be taken out into the courtyard and they sealed the home—all the doors and windows—with the two children left screaming inside the home and they put up a sign which threatened anyone trespassing with death.

They took the couple to the local jail and the next morning they were put on a train and sent into exile. The train traveled several days north. They came to a stop and they took the woman off and she was sent to some detention center for women. He continued for about another half day's journey and they took him off the train and put him into a camp. He was in that camp for two and a half years, during which he suffered greatly from malnutrition, dysentery, and pneumonia. He was working in the mines. The detainees had no heat and he

would be sent to the mines where it was very warm, so he experienced a change of temperature. The whole barracks was always with diseases and with illnesses, with a great deal of deprivation. There were thirty-five residents in that particular barracks and they were all very weak and, of course, the authorities were just waiting for them to die off one by one. This man, however, persevered.

One evening, the door opened and in walked a fully vested Bishop in green vestments, complete with miter and staff. Vladika walked in and they all just stared at him—they couldn't believe their eyes: How could a fully vested hierarch come into that barracks? And he said, "Oh my. What a sorry lot you all look to be. I feel so *sorry* for you all. But I think we should do something." In the center of the compound there was a mound (as most of those centers had) and they used to place the guards on that mound and there they would have public whippings and executions. It was always elevated so it could be seen clearly. Vladika continued, "We'll go out on that mound and pray."

Well, they were so terrified and so awestruck that no one could move, and there were many who were so sick they couldn't move. And he said, "Why are you all standing and sitting there? I said, let us go out and pray and I will pray and you will all come up on that mound, and you will kneel down and pray. Come on now, everybody, let's go."

So those who could move got up and started and helped those who could not. And all thirty-five of them dragged themselves out of the barracks and up onto that mound and he led the way. No one reacted at all—no sirens, no guards, nothing. They couldn't believe what was happening to them, but it happened to all thirty five of them so it was not a vision of just one man. As they got to the top of the mound, he turned to them and said; "Now everyone kneel down and pray." So they knelt down, but no one could pray. He said, "Say the 'Otche Nash' (The Lord's Prayer)." No one could say anything. They cried and cried. He turned and prayed for a long time. No one could remember the words of the 'Otche Nash'—they had been through such tribulations. So Saint Nicholas, after praying again for a long time, turned to them and said, "You couldn't even pray. You couldn't even remember the words of the 'Otche Nash' but your tears have been your prayers, and God has heard them and has accepted them. So, turn around and walk out the gate."

They were all amazed at this and said, "Well, we came this far and we haven't been challenged—now we are told to go out the gate." But they hesitated still and he said, "No, leave now. Turn around, no one will trouble you. Walk

through the gates and go wherever you wish and you will not be hindered.” They got up, and as they got up and started walking, they felt great strength; they all felt renewed as if they were twenty one years old, as if they were well fed and completely healed and healthy. They started walking and as they approached the gates, the gates opened and they walked right through. The guards with their rifles were there; on one responded at all, it was as if they were invisible. They walked, all thirty-five of them, through the gates, but this man, who related his story to Father Barsanuphius, turned and said, “Who *are* you? What bishop are you?” And he said, “I am Nicholas.”

And the man turned and walked through the gates and all thirty-five of them left the camp unhindered. He walked to the next village which was some day’s journey—it had been half a day on the train but it took some days for him—and he went to that village where he remembered that they had taken his wife off the train. As he approached the village, he met an old lady and he told her his story; she wept and took him into her home. She said, “You stay here and we’ll try to make contact with the camp which is near the town.” This eventually happened and through someone who worked at this camp it was determined that his wife was still alive. They got a message through that her husband was in town and at a certain person’s house. Miraculously, one day papers came through and she was released, so the two of them were united in that town. And his wife said, “Now what will we do?”

He said, “We will go back home and bury our children.” They made their way back to their home which was still sealed with the faded sign on the door. They broke through, went into the house, and found the skeletons of their children which they buried in the yard of what had been their home. Eventually they left Russia with the retreat of the German army. Fleeing through Germany, they finally arrived in the United States.

So it is there are living miracles even to this day of our Saint Nicholas who works marvels wondrously in our times.

Blessed is our God, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit
unto Whom be glory, honour, and worship,
now and ever and unto the ages of ages.
Amen.